

Burial At Sea: The Odyssey of JFK's Original Casket



It was approximately 1:00 PM when a man called Vernon B. O'Neal of O'Neal's Funeral Home and asked for the best casket that O'Neal had available. The man on the phone, simultaneously calm and tense, needed the coffin quickly and O'Neal had a slight problem. Of the 18 people

who worked at O'Neal's Funeral Home, 17 of them were out to lunch. After all, it was a beautiful Friday day for November in Texas.

O'Neal picked out a solid-bronze coffin with white satin lining tagged at a sales price of \$3,995 from his storeroom and waited for three more of his employees to return from lunch. The bulky Handley Britannia casket from the Elgin Casket Company weighed over 400 pounds when it was empty and O'Neal certainly couldn't lift it into his Cadillac hearse by himself. Once he had it loaded, he rushed to Parkland Memorial Hospital on the most important delivery of his career. The man who had ordered the casket, Clint Hill, was a Secret Service agent and less than an hour earlier he had climbed on to the back of a moving limousine to try to get to the subject he was charged to protect. He was unsuccessful. The casket was for the President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

When the casket arrived at Parkland Hospital, O'Neal was met by agents from the Secret Service and some of President Kennedy's aides. They helped O'Neal push the coffin into the hospital and down a corridor towards Trauma Room One where the President had been officially pronounced dead just minutes earlier. One of the President's aides and the doctor who had just worked on Kennedy tried to distract the President's grieving wife so that she wasn't anguished further by the sight of the coffin that her now-dead husband was about to be placed in.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy refused to turn away and begged to be let into the Trauma Room to see her husband once more. The doctor didn't want her to see anything else, but Jackie insisted, telling the doctor "How can I see anything worse than what I've seen?" and pointing out that "His blood is all over me!" The doctor let her in the Trauma Room as O'Neal wheeled the casket inside and she placed her wedding ring on JFK's finger before retreating back to the outer hallway once again.

Vernon O'Neal was horrified when he saw the condition of the President's body. Blood was everywhere and a gaping wound exposed brain matter which was seeping out of John F. Kennedy's head. Not wanting to damage the beautiful and expensive casket that he had picked out for the President, O'Neal and several emergency room nurses went to work. The bottom of the inside of the coffin was lined with a plastic mattress covering and the President's body was wrapped in a bed sheet. The nurses went even further and spent 20 minutes carefully wrapping President Kennedy's head in numerous white bed sheets so that blood didn't seep through and stain the lining of the casket.

After Kennedy's body was placed in the coffin, preparations were made to leave Parkland Hospital and take the President back to Air Force One at Dallas's Love Field so that they could transport him back to Washington, D.C. As the Secret Service and the President's aides (many of whom were longtime, close friends of JFK) wheeled his casket towards the exit, they were stopped by Dr. Earl Rose, the medical examiner for Dallas County, Texas. In 1963, it was not a federal crime to kill the President of the United States. Because of this, there was no federal jurisdiction for John F. Kennedy's murder – only local. Despite the scale of the crime to the nation, it was technically just another murder in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963 (because of the laws at the time, on a purely legal basis, the murder of Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit about 45 minutes after Kennedy's shooting was a far more serious crime than the President's assassination). Because of this, Dr. Rose informed the men escorting the President's body that

they needed to leave it in Dallas. Rose noted that he needed to autopsy the body before they took it anywhere. To Dr. Rose, a homicide victim was a homicide victim and he had a job to do. The Secret Service was incredulous and President Kennedy's loyal aides were even angrier. In the corridor of Parkland Memorial Hospital, things got tense. Rose found himself in a shouting match with the Secret Service and some of Kennedy's aides. Even the doctors at Parkland sided with the Secret Service and pleaded with Rose to release the body so that they could take the President back to Washington. A justice of the peace arrived, with the power to overrule the medical examiner. But he didn't. The justice of the peace said that Kennedy would have to be autopsied in Dallas and ensured the Secret Service that it wouldn't take any more than three hours.

Again, tempers flared and the men in the hallway at Parkland were close to fisticuffs as the medical examiner, Dr. Rose, literally blocked the casket's path with his body in order to keep it inside the hospital. When the President's close aide, Kenny O'Donnell, appealed to the medical examiner and the justice of the peace for compassion for Jackie Kennedy and an exception for this case so that they could return the dead President to Washington and get Jackie out of Texas as quickly as possible, the justice of the peace, Theron Ward, refused.

"It's just another homicide as far as I'm concerned," said the justice of the peace.

O'Donnell lost his temper, "Go fuck yourself! We're leaving. Get the hell out of the way."

With that, the Secret Service and all the President's men pushed forward. The medical examiner, the justice of the peace, and several Dallas policemen were forcibly shoved out of the way by Secret Service agents who were ready to draw their guns, if necessary. Jackie Kennedy was close by, her hand softly guiding the President's bronze casket as it was removed from the hospital and placed in the hearse which raced en route to Love Field and Air Force One.



When the entourage arrived at Air Force One, they found a plane completely encircled by heavily armed Secret Service agents. The plane's powerful engines were running, ready to lift off at any moment and push Dallas and everything that happened there behind them as quickly

as possible. Fearing the unknown and suspecting a possible conspiracy to decapitate the entire government, the shades were drawn down over the windows throughout the aircraft in order to protect against any further possible attacks. On the plane was Lyndon Johnson, soon-to-be sworn in as the 36th President of the United States, and awaiting the arrival of Jackie and the body of the deceased President. The Secret Service and the President's aides struggled with the extraordinarily heavy casket as they maneuvered it up the steps to Air Force One and into a holding area in the back of the plane cleared out by removing two rows of seats.

Jackie remained with President Kennedy's casket from almost the entire time she boarded Air Force One until it landed at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington. The only exception was prior to the plane taking off from Dallas when she stood – still wearing her blood-stained pink Chanel dress – on one side of Lyndon Johnson as he took the oath of office as the new President, his hand resting on JFK's book of Catholic missals, which had been found in JFK's private cabin by aides rummaging for a Bible for the oath-taking ceremony.

For four hours, Air Force One flew in a dark cloud of sadness towards the nation's capital. New President Johnson made numerous phone calls, including calls to the slain President's mother, Rose, and brother, the Attorney General Bobby Kennedy. In flight, LBJ also hastily made preparations for meetings upon landing in Washington. In the back of the plane, a silent vigil was held around John F. Kennedy's casket by Jackie and the President's aides, who were so close to Kennedy that they were often referred to as the "Irish Mafia".

President Kennedy's personal physician, Admiral George Burkley, suggested to Jackie that JFK's body be taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital upon arrival in Washington for the autopsy. Jackie showed great compassion herself on that terrible flight. She insisted that Bill Greer drive the hearse carrying the President's casket to Bethesda. Greer was grief-stricken and apologetic during the flight because he had been driving JFK's limousine in Dallas and made no attempt to speed up or make evasive maneuvers when shots were first fired. Greer felt partly responsible for President Kennedy's death and Jackie wanted to show her confidence and appreciation in his service to her late husband.

When Air Force One arrived at Andrews Air Force Base after dark on November 22, 1963, Bobby Kennedy rushed on to the plane and directly to Jackie to comfort his sister-in-law, blowing past President Johnson and snubbing LBJ as the new President attempted to offer his condolences to JFK's devastated brother. The dead President's aides and Secret Service detail rebuffed a military casket team who arrived to remove the President's coffin from the plane. Instead they formed a personal honor guard and handled Kennedy's casket themselves, awkwardly placing it on to a catering lift and lowering it to the ground so that they could place it in a waiting hearse. Jackie and Bobby climbed into the back of the hearse with JFK's casket and drove straight to Bethesda as President Johnson made a statement for the millions of Americans watching the arrival ceremony on live television.



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The motorcade transporting the body of President John F. Kennedy from Andrews Air Force Base to Bethesda Naval Hospital for his autopsy arrived right around the same time that President Lyndon Johnson's helicopter landed on the South Lawn of the White House from Andrews so that the new President could take the reins of the government of a nation in shock. As trusted members of his "Irish Mafia" helped to remove Kennedy's casket from the hearse, Jackie Kennedy and RFK headed upstairs at Bethesda where private suites were set aside for their comfort and friends and family were waiting to help with the comforting.

Across town, the new President prepared to charge into his new duties. During the flight home from Dallas, Lyndon Johnson had summoned Cabinet members, diplomats, Members of Congress, current White House aides, former White House aides, and anybody else who had any inkling of what powered the Executive Branch, to meet him at the White House upon his arrival for consultation, directions, and mutual support. Upon arriving at the White House, Johnson briefly spent a moment by himself in the Oval Office before leaving and walking with aides to the neighboring Old Executive Office Building. LBJ didn't feel right with immediately setting up shop in the Oval Office just hours after President Kennedy's death. Instead, Johnson decided to use his Vice Presidential office in the OEOB for the meetings he planned on holding that night.

Before those meetings began, however, President Johnson took a moment for a brief pause in his frenetic assumption of the Presidency. Requesting a few minutes of privacy, LBJ sat down at his desk in the OEOB and wrote two short letters which became the first pieces of correspondence of the Johnson Administration – letters which the young recipients couldn't even read yet:

“Dear John—It will be many years before you understand fully what a great man your father was. His loss is a deep personal tragedy for all of us, but I wanted you particularly to know that I share your grief—You can always be proud of him. Affectionately, Lyndon Johnson”

“Dearest Caroline—Your father’s death has been a great tragedy for the Nation, as well as for you at this time. He was a wise and devoted man. You can always be proud of what he did for his country. Affectionately, Lyndon Johnson”

The casket containing the father of those two young children had been wheeled into the hallways leading to Bethesda Naval Hospital’s morgue. Despite the fact that this was being done in a completely secure, private, inner sanctum of the famed military hospital, the casket was that of a man who had started the day as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Military. Out of respect and duty, an honor guard lifted the coffin from a gurney and carried it through the halls and into the brightly-lit, antiseptic autopsy room where doctors prepared to examine the lifeless body of the 35th President of the United States.

When President Kennedy’s casket was opened, it became readily apparent that the hard work of Vernon O’Neal and the nurses at Parkland Hospital in Dallas to protect the inside of the expensive coffin was unsuccessful. The makeshift bandage which had been carefully wrapped around Kennedy’s head did not prevent seepage after all. Blood soaked through the sheets which made up the “bandage” and the inner lining of Kennedy’s ornate casket was obviously damaged. It was a surreal, eerie sight in the autopsy room as John F. Kennedy was removed from his coffin and placed on the stainless steel autopsy table at Bethesda. The 35th President was naked and seemed to be in remarkably good physical condition for a 46-year-old man who was known to suffer from serious health problems. Most shocking for those in the room during the autopsy, however, was the fact that this seemingly young and vital President who had inspired a new generation was now very much dead with a massive gunshot wound to the head that exposed the part of his brain still contained within it and left the top of his skull jaggedly disfigured with missing pieces of bone and flesh. Kennedy’s eyes were fixed open, staring vacantly into space with dilated pupils that could no longer envision ambitious goals for his nation. The mouth which formed his famous words, framed his most inspirational messages, and spoke that unmistakable Boston accent now hung open, forever silenced and permanently paralyzed in a final expression which seemed to mirror the mood of the entire country: a combination of shock, pain, horror, and perplexity.

The pathologists who performed John F. Kennedy’s autopsy finished their work shortly after midnight on November 23, 1963. Photographs and drawings were taken of Kennedy’s body during the autopsy, and when the autopsy was finished, morticians from one of the capital’s finest funeral parlors arrived on the scene. A team from Gawler’s Funeral Home entered the autopsy room at Bethesda Naval Hospital to embalm the President and attempt to make him presentable. The casket that brought JFK back to Washington from Dallas would not work. While the casket from O’Neal’s was a beauty from the exterior, the interior was a mess. All of the safeguards attempted by O’Neal and the Parkland nurses in Dallas were not quite enough to protect the inside of the Handley Britannia from the gruesome wound that had killed the President.

The question many might have is why would there be such a need to make John F. Kennedy’s remains presentable when JFK was obviously in no condition to be viewed? Why couldn’t they

simply close that beautiful Handley Britannia casket that was purchased in Dallas and bury Kennedy in the container which carried him back to Washington?

At the orders of Jackie Kennedy, aides went to the Library of Congress in the hours after President Kennedy's body returned to Washington, D.C. and researched the historic, iconic, epic state funeral of Abraham Lincoln – the first American President to be assassinated, almost exactly a century earlier. Kennedy's funeral preparations would be steeped in tradition and either perfectly replicate or closely mirror the funerals of other fallen American Presidents including Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley, Warren G. Harding, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. As information about these past Presidential funerals (along with the funerals of famous Congressional and military leaders throughout United States history) was brought forward, one constant was apparent: in almost every case, the fallen leader was viewed by a grieving public in an open casket display. For many Americans, streaming past the open casket of a former President or American military hero was an opportunity to pay tribute, look upon the face of a fallen hero, and find closure in another storied chapter of American History.

Yet, as much as Jackie wished to replicate Lincoln's funeral, she was dismayed at the thought of an open casket for John F. Kennedy. Jackie had seen what the assassin's bullet had done to her husband. As Kennedy's motorcade raced to Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas minutes after the shooting, Jackie wouldn't allow doctors and Secret Service agents to remove President Kennedy's body from the limousine until an agent covered Kennedy's head with his suit jacket, shielded the President from the view of others, and preserved some of the dignity that was so important to the Kennedy image. As the morticians from Gawler's worked on JFK, Jackie once again expressed her wish that her husband's coffin would be closed. Bobby Kennedy, however, didn't think that the decision was up to the family. RFK felt strongly that JFK belonged to the people, too, and that the American people would want their opportunity to say goodbye.

Following his assassination in 1865, Abraham Lincoln's remains embarked on an epic, 20-day-long train trip that retraced the route he took to Washington in 1861 prior to his Inauguration. In major cities throughout the Northeast and Upper Midwest, hundreds of thousands of Americans turned out to pay their respects to their "martyred" President. Embalming was a relatively newly-mastered American art at the time of Lincoln's death – a technique which had been much-improved upon and much-practiced during the Civil War when young men frequently died far from home and families looked to preserve their fallen loved ones so that they could have one last look at them before they were laid to rest.

However, even today, embalming can't guarantee perfect preservation for an extended amount of time. In 1865, there were definitely some worries about Lincoln's extended, national funeral. After all, the warm weather of spring had started throughout the United States and Lincoln would be honored with open casket viewings by Americans in well over a dozen cities between Washington, D.C. and Springfield, Illinois in the twenty days after his death. Some people worried whether it was appropriate to view Lincoln's corpse at all considering the fact that he had died from a gunshot wound to the head. Lincoln's wound was far less devastating visually than Kennedy's. The bullet that killed Lincoln had entered his brain, but did not exit Lincoln's skull. The only damage visible was a black eye from bruising of the facial bones close to where John Wilkes Booth's bullet had lodged in Lincoln's brain. Undertakers accompanied Lincoln's body on the funeral train back to Springfield and as time passed, they certainly became

necessary. Lincoln's face blackened considerably by the time his remains reached Springfield – partly from the dirt and dust of twenty days exposure to the elements, but also partly due to the beginning stages of decomposition. At some cities, the undertakers who accompanied Lincoln home would brush his face with chalk to make him more presentable to the citizens who came to pay their respects. In a few cities, it also became necessary to surround Lincoln's casket with fragrant flowers and spray the area with heavy perfumes for reasons that I'm sure aren't too difficult to surmise.

John F. Kennedy was not going to be viewed by the public for twenty days in over a dozen cities throughout the country and the funeral industry had made even larger strides in the century since Lincoln's death. However, JFK was severely disfigured by the bullet that killed him.

Unlike in Lincoln's case, the bullet that tore through Kennedy's skull and brain also exited his head, causing major damage that would be difficult for even the most-skilled mortician to disguise. The team from Gawler's were perhaps the best in the business, but it wasn't simply a matter of brushing some chalk or cosmetic makeup on Kennedy's face to cover up some bruising or minor discoloration. Entire pieces of JFK's skull were missing and parts of the President's head needed to be synthetically reconstructed. The morticians also had to pack his skull with cotton and Plaster of Paris in the place of his brain – parts of which were removed during the autopsy and other parts of which were in countless places including (but not limited to) the fabric of his wife's Pink Chanel dress, the windshields of the motorcycle cops escorting his motorcade in Dallas, the backseat and trunk of his limousine, and all over Dealey Plaza in Dallas.

The mortuary team from Gawler's took over three hours to work on President Kennedy, clean him up, dress him (in a bluish-gray pinstriped suit with a white shirt, black shoes, and blue tie with dots), place him in a brand-new casket and put a rosary in the hands of the nation's only Catholic President. A little after 4:00 AM, President Kennedy, his widow and Bobby Kennedy arrived the White House after a solemn motorcade through the darkened streets of Washington. In the first nod to Lincoln's funeral, JFK's flag-draped casket is carried by an honor guard into the East Room of the White House and placed on a replica of the black catafalque that Lincoln's coffin once rested on. After Kennedy's casket is situated in the East Room, Jackie Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy entered the room and asked that the lid be opened. Both Jackie and Bobby were exhausted and emotionally drained, and Jackie was still wearing the Pink Chanel dress that she had cradled her dying husband's head in. The front of her dress was smeared with the dried blood and brain matter of the President. As ghastly as the sight was, Jackie continually refused to change, noting that she wanted everyone to see what "they" did to her husband. As the casket lid was opened, Jackie snipped a lock of her husband's hair with scissors and turned to Bobby, saying, "It isn't Jack" – once again alluding to her wish that the casket remain closed.

Jackie left the East Room and headed upstairs to the White House Residence to finally change her clothes and attempt to sleep. In the East Room, Bobby remained near his brother's coffin with a couple of friends, close aides, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The stoic RFK – always much tougher than his older brother – was a wreck by this point, after attempting to stay strong and supportive throughout the night for his stunned sister-in-law. Bobby had not yet looked at JFK's remains. To finally make the decision about whether or not JFK would have

an open casket, RFK took a look at his brother's face. When he saw Jack in the coffin, RFK immediately agreed with Jackie's feelings, "She's right. Close it." While the team from Gawler's had done an admirable job of repairing the massive trauma to the President's head, JFK was virtually unrecognizable as the man he once was. To those who saw his body as the casket was briefly open in the East Room early that morning, it was apparent that the American people wouldn't want to remember their fallen President in that way – as if he were a wax museum knock-off of the real John F. Kennedy. The funeral ceremonies over the next few days would all be closed casket and the nation would remember JFK as the young, lively, inspirational President that he had been for so many Americans.

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Since the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, there have been so many unanswered questions and theories and allegations. Many are the result of sloppy work on behalf of the government in the hours following the shooting, during the autopsy, after the autopsy, and in the failure to protect the suspected assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, as he was being transferred to a new facility to face charges of murdering President Kennedy and Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit. Evidence has been lost or misplaced, and some records remain sealed until 2017 – 54 years after the assassination and 100 years after JFK's birth.

There is one aspect of this story that received some closure, however, and that is what happened to JFK's original casket – the expensive Handley Britannia coffin that Clint Hill ordered from Vernon O'Neal's Funeral Home in Dallas in the hectic minutes after President Kennedy was pronounced dead.

After JFK's autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital and the hard work by the mortuary team from Gawler's Funeral Home to make him presentable, President Kennedy couldn't be placed back in the beautiful but bloodstained bronze coffin that had carried him home from Texas. Gawler's had brought with them to Bethesda another elegant casket fit for a President – a \$3,160 Marsellus 710 coffin that was crafted from "hand-rubbed, five-hundred-year-old African mahogany". It was that flag-draped casket from Gawler's that John F. Kennedy, Jr. saluted and Americans saw being laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery.

The history of Vernon O'Neal's casket did not end that night at Bethesda when President Kennedy was transferred to a different coffin. Gawler's Funeral Home took possession of JFK's original casket after they placed him in the undamaged casket that their mortuary team had brought to Bethesda Naval Hospital following Kennedy's autopsy. Whether it was as a morbid souvenir or simply due to confusion about what to do with it, Gawler's stored JFK's original coffin in a warehouse in Washington, D.C. In January 1964, less than two months after JFK's burial, Vernon O'Neal submitted a bill to the federal government for \$3,995 for the casket that Secret Service Agent Clint Hill ordered in Dallas and JFK was transported to Washington in. The government felt that O'Neal's bill was "excessive", particularly since he had merely delivered the casket to Parkland Hospital in Dallas and had not performed any other funeral services such as embalming, chapel services or transportation of mourners. O'Neal lowered the price by \$500, but the government still had an issue with the \$3,495 price tag. What Vernon O'Neal actually wanted was the casket itself. O'Neal had received offers of \$100,000 by parties interested in collecting and displaying the casket as a unique relic of the slain President. For the Kennedy Family – still reeling from the assassination and its aftermath – the last thing they

wanted was a spectacle surrounding a bloodstained coffin that JFK had spent just a few hours in. At the family's urging, the federal government paid O'Neal (he received \$3,160 for his services on November 22, 1963) and the General Services Administration took possession of the object in 1965.

In September 1965, the House of Representatives passed a bill which required the government to preserve any objects related to the Kennedy Assassination which might contain evidentiary value. Several days later, Representative Earle Cabell from Texas sent a letter to Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach (who had replaced Bobby Kennedy at the Justice Department a year earlier). In his letter, Congressman Cabell suggested that the casket had no value for anyone other than "the morbidly curious". Since the Kennedy Family "did not see fit to use this particular casket in the ultimate interment of the body", Cabell felt that it was "surplus" material owned and controlled by the federal government. To shut down those who might be "morbidly curious", Cabell recommended that the casket "be declared the proper property of the USA and, as such and in keeping with the best interest of the country, be destroyed."

The Kennedy Family agreed with Congressman Cabell's sentiments and Attorney General Katzenbach ensured everyone that the casket had no evidentiary value, no good reason for display or storage, and that it was the property that the government had the right to dispose of in whichever way it sought fit. On February 18, 1966, several members of the Air Force picked the casket up from a secure building at the National Archives just a few blocks from the White House. The casket was placed in an Air Force truck and transported to Andrews Air Force Base – the very place that the casket had originally landed in Washington with President Kennedy inside of it less than three years earlier. At Andrews, the Air Force team from the 93rd Air Terminal Squadron loaded the coffin on to a C130 transport plane.

To dispose of the casket, the Air Force had decided to take it to a place that JFK had once considered being buried: the Atlantic Ocean. Kennedy loved the sea and was said to have considered being buried at sea when he died. Of course, we know that Kennedy was buried at Arlington National Cemetery instead, but for many reasons, the Atlantic Ocean was the perfect place for the disposal of the casket that had brought him back to Washington following his assassination.

The Air Force wanted to ensure the integrity of the casket and not allow it to become a souvenir by someone who happened to come across it floating in the ocean or washing up on the shore. The C130 flew about 100 miles east of Washington, D.C. and descended to about 500 feet above the water. Before taking off, the Air Force had drilled over 40 holes into the casket and filled it with three 80-pound sandbags. It was also secured inside of a wooden crate and sealed shut in a manner so that it wouldn't break apart upon hitting the water.

At approximately 10:00 AM, the C130's tail hatch was opened and the casket was pushed out of the aircraft. Parachutes softened its fall and the coffin began to sink instantly. The airplane circled the drop zone for about 20 minutes to make sure that the coffin didn't resurface, but they had no reason to worry. The Air Force had chosen an area of the Atlantic that saw very little air or sea traffic, and the casket settled in about 9,000 feet of water. The Kennedy Family was relieved that they no longer had to worry about a bloody casket going on display somewhere for the "morbidly curious".

Coincidentally, in 1999, President Kennedy's son, John F. Kennedy, Jr. was killed when the plane he was flying crashed near Martha's Vineyard. After his body was recovered and identified, JFK Jr.'s remains were taken out into the Atlantic Ocean – just a few hundred miles from the drop zone of his father's original casket – and buried at sea.



Posted at 9:25 AM

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